

Local Regime after the Great East Japan Earthquake: For a Study on the Politics of Post-disaster Reconstruction

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PURPOSE OF THE PAPER

On March 11, 2011, the Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunamis claimed uncountable lives; engulfed cities, towns, and fishing villages; and greatly damaged the infrastructure in the coastal region of northeastern Japan. Following the disasters, national government-funded regional reconstruction projects have commenced in devastated municipalities, except the evacuated areas around the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant. Now, one year and nine months after the disaster, the reconstruction projects are underway here too, despite their enormous task.

Regional reconstruction projects in the damaged cities and towns pose two key questions for researchers interested in Japan's urban and regional politics and political economy. The first is regarding the nature of 'Japanese urban and regional politics' impact on the reconstruction projects. In the affected region, there are many small and middle-sized cities, most of which were seriously damaged by the disaster. The process of regional reconstruction in each city is primarily affected by its local political structure built before the disaster. While the Japanese national government is involved in the projects to a considerable extent through making laws and supplying funds, local political actors in the devastated regions are also highly engaged in the decision-making processes. Therefore, not only the natural disasters themselves but also the local political structure of each city affect the features and

progress of the post-disaster reconstruction projects.

The other question concerns whether each city's local political structure will transform through the regional reconstruction projects, and if so, into what kind of structure. Due to the immense damage caused by the quakes and tsunamis, the reconstruction projects involve a wide variety of actors and receive a large amount of money from both within and outside each city. Therefore, the projects may represent a historical opportunity for the political restructuring of the cities. In this paper, we will discuss the relationship between local political regimes and the regional post-disaster reconstruction projects, focusing on Ofunato, a small city of approximately 40,000 inhabitants, located on the eastern coast of Iwate Prefecture. In Ofunato, the 3/11 tsunamis hit the coastal and central areas. Over 450 people were killed or went missing, and 30% of all buildings were seriously damaged. Since the Meiji era, Iwate's coastal region, including Ofunato, has experienced three tsunamis caused by giant earthquakes: in 1896, 1933, and 1960. Cities, towns, and villages in the region have been revived and reconstructed each time.

Because the regional reconstruction projects have recently begun, we cannot make definite conclusions about them. This paper aims to clarify the issue and propose hypotheses for future research on the local politics surrounding post-disaster reconstruction projects. In the following section, we will summarize the characteristics of Ofunato's local political structure built before the Great East Japan

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Earthquake. Considering this background, we will examine the city's regional reconstruction project. Finally, we will discuss issues and hypotheses for future research.

OFUNATO BEFORE THE 2011 DISASTER

Ofunato is situated in southeast Iwate Prefecture (see Figure 1). It covers 323.3 km² and includes fishing and mountainous villages. The city's population is approximately 40,000, about 18% of whom (7,321 people, according to the 2005 census) live in the DID (Ofunato city authority 2010).

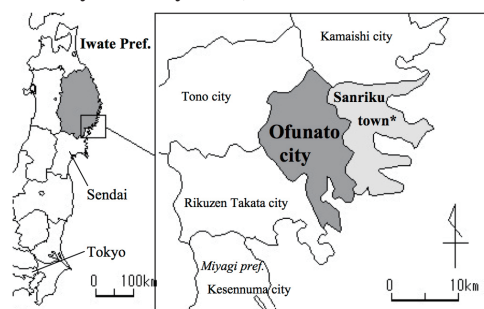


Figure 1: Map of Ofunato city
Note: Sanriku town was merged into Ofunato city 2001.

In the Edo era, Ofunato included fishing and mountainous villages in addition to the commercial and administration town. Because the ocean provided abundant food, many fisherfolk lived on the coast. Others worked in timber in the backland.

In the 1930s, a private company began manufacturing cement using limestone from the city's backland. This served as a catalyst for Ofunato's transformation into a modern heavy industrial city. In 1952, two towns and five villages in the region merged into Ofunato city to comply with a national development project to build a coastal heavy industrial city (*'rinkai kogyo moderu toshi'*). In addition, the Ofunato city authority bid to become a model city of "industrial development in underdeveloped areas (*'teikaihatsu chiiki kogyo*

kaihatsu')," a national industrial location policy implemented in the age of economic high growth in the 1960s (Editorial Committee of History of Ofunato City 2002). Ofunato's local entrepreneurs, especially those in the declining fishery sector, and local politicians from the industrial sector scrambled to bid for the model city designation.

These big development projects supported by the national government promoted not only regional industrialization but also construction of the city's urban infrastructure such as seaports and fishing industrial complexes. In addition, the projects aimed to improve people's economic status in the coastal region of northern Japan, one of the poorest districts in the country. The Japanese national land and industrial location policies in the age of economic high growth between the 1950s and 1980s aimed at "even development of national land" (*The 1st Comprehensive National Development Plan*, established in 1962) and suggested correcting uneven regional development. Under these policies, small and middle-sized cities, towns, and villages in the country, including Ofunato, enjoyed regional economic growth and an increased population until the 1980s (see Figure 2).

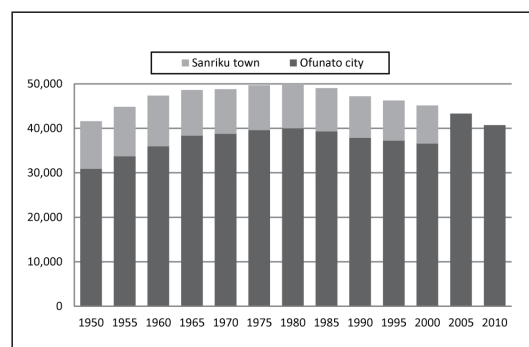


Figure 2: Population in Ofunato city
Source: Census.

Since the 1980s, fishery in Japan stagnated at a low level. As a result, the marine product processing industry in Ofunato declined. Later, Japan's economic turmoil following the bubble burst in the

early 1990s devastated Ofunato's cement industry because the industry was susceptible to the effects of public and private construction projects (see Figure 3). In addition, the city faced an increasing aging population.

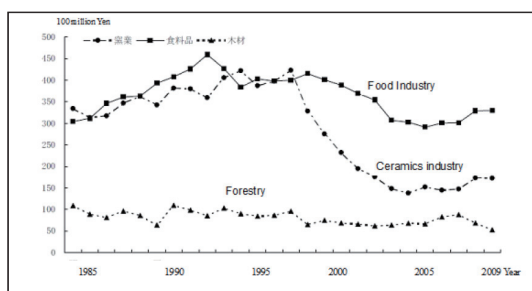


Figure 3: Shipment values of Ofunato's manufacturing industries
Source: Ofunato city authority (2010).

Influenced by the economic depression, the Japanese national government implemented a decentralization policy in the 1990s. Gradually, the policy, called “heisei municipal mergers,” encouraged local governments to merge. It offered financial support for mergers and penalties for non-mergers. Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's neoliberal administration (2001–2006) strongly pursued the policy, which ended in March 2010, one year before the Great East Japan Earthquake. Overall, it led to a reduction in the number of municipalities from 3,229 (April 1999) to 1,730 (March 2010).

Under the merger policy, the Ofunato city authority merged with Sanriku town, located north of Ofunato, in November 2001. The Sanriku town authority had faced a fiscal crisis induced by its increasing aged population and declining fishery industry. Therefore, the town officials eagerly sought fiscal support through the national merger policy.

Ofunato's local entrepreneurs and politicians expected that the fiscal support from the merger would enable the city authority to develop and redevelop urban infrastructures and enrich the city's urban competitiveness (Maruyama 2005). Accordingly, the city authority accrued a 10-year 63.2

billion yen package from the national fiscal support and invested it in construction projects for urban infrastructure.¹

THE 2011 DISASTER AND ITS AFTERMATH IN OFUNATO

On March 11, 2011, 2:46 pm, Ofunato experienced a huge quake measuring six lower on the Japanese intensity scale and was struck by three tsunamis, one of which was 23.6 meters high (The Port and Airport Research Institute 2011). The quake and tsunamis claimed 340 lives and caused 82 persons to go missing. In addition, 5,433 houses and buildings were damaged, amounting to property damage worth 107.7 billion yen.² Photo 1 shows downtown Ofunato a few months after the disaster.

One month after the disaster, on April 20, the Ofunato city authority prescribed a basic regional recovery and reconstruction policy. Forthwith, the authority established a planning committee comprising local politicians and business leaders as well as urban planners at the university. They finalized the city's reconstruction plan on October 31. The plan suggests the construction of public housing, removal of coastal settlements, and repair and construction of fishing ports and roads. A significant portion of the amount for these regional reconstruction projects will be covered by the national government. Photo 2 shows the downtown area of Ofunato more than a year after the disaster.

In addition to the municipal reconstruction plan, there are other plans for regional reconstruction. One is the “Kesen Regional Future City” project, which is supported by the national government. In 2010, the national cabinet office planned the “Future City” Initiative as an urban and regional development project to strengthen regional competitiveness. After the 3/11 disaster, the cabinet office changed this

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Photo1: Downtown Ofunato four months after the tsunami disaster
Note: Photo by author on July 19th, 2011.



Photo2: Downtown Ofunato fourteen months after the tsunami disaster
Note: Photo by author on May 18th, 2012 (same location with photo above).



Photo3: Downtown Ofunato eighteen months after the tsunami disaster
Note: Photo by author on September 30th, 2012 (same location with photo above).

policy into a financial support menu for regional reconstruction. In December 2011, it adopted 11 cities and regions, including six that were devastated.³

After competing with municipalities situated next to Ofunato and battery industry groups, Ofunato city was selected as this initiative's model region. The "Kesen Regional Future City" project includes a plan for new energy development, such as constructing a solar power station, hybrid energy system, smart grid, and accumulator plant.

The cabinet office describes the policy design as follows: "The Japanese government selected some strategic cities and regions and intensively focused our policy resources there to support, for example, an urban energy management system with a smart grid, recyclable energy, next-generation vehicles, the environmental industry and industrial innovation, and increased use of recyclable energy."⁴ As this indicates, the policy was designed as a new tool for not government- but private-driven regional development. After the 3/11 disaster, it was altered for regional reconstruction. In addition, the new policy's experiments of "selection and concentration" and "private initiative" have become widespread in state neoliberal reforms in the 1990s and early 2000s.

TOWARD FUTURE RESEARCH ON THE POLITICS OF REGIONAL RECONSTRUCTION AFTER THE DISASTER

In this paper, we studied the local political situation of a devastated city, Ofunato. We examined the situation before the Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunamis as well as the current situation during the regional post-disaster reconstruction projects. Finally, we consider an agenda for future research on local political regime studies, using this case as an example.

Within the past two decades, the research perspective and method of local regime analysis (Stone 1989) has expanded its area of study to students interested

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in local politics and political economy. Local regime is generally defined as “formal and informal modes of collaboration between business and government” (Mossberger 2009: 41) and is embodied within the actions of a governing coalition, which is “an informal yet relatively stable group with access to institutional resources that enable it to have a sustained role in making governing decisions” (Stone 1989: 4, original emphasis).

In studies on contemporary Japanese local politics, some researchers have indicated that they cannot find “market liberal regimes” in US cities (Elkin 1987) or Western European welfare states (John and Cole 1998; Harding 2000), but instead identify a “regional development regime” (Nakazawa 2005) or “developmentalist regime” (Maruyama 2011). This unique Japanese local regime shares the characteristic of preference for regional economic growth and development with the market liberal regime. However, this case is not an ideal type of a market liberal regime. In the Japanese developmentalist regime, not free economic activities by private entrepreneurs but local government’s interventionist activities have contributed to regional economic development and growth. In addition, local officials and politicians have scrambled for financial support from the national government for regional industrial development and construction of urban infrastructure. The public and private sectors, and even the labor sector, have always acted in harmony with each other. Since the 1990s, the Japanese developmentalist regime has drastically changed, as the “entrepreneurist regime” has become prominent since the US and Western Europe economic crisis in the 1970s. There is history of local economic restructuring under the influence of economic globalization and competition-driven reform of the central–local governmental relationship.

We return to the first question presented in the

paper. How will Japanese urban and regional political economic structures impact post-disaster reconstruction projects? We propose two hypotheses based on the case of Ofunato.

First, the developmentalist regime may have an impact. The close political partnership between the public and private sectors and the goal of promoting regional economic development and growth may influence the regional reconstruction projects. The coalition may strongly drive the project forward, especially the revival of the regional industrial infrastructures, using financial support from the national government. As a result, the reconstruction projects may increase regional economic competitiveness from what it was before the disaster. On the other hand, we may witness negative consequences. For example, with its emphasis on economic growth, the coalition may postpone the reconstruction of infrastructure for residential livelihood. Also, the closed coalition between public and private sectors may exclude new actors such as external civil society organizations seeking to engage in residential rescue and regional restoration. In addition, the reconstruction projects may reinforce local fiscal dependence on national government.

Second, the neoliberal turn of the developmentalist regime may influence the regional reconstruction projects. Within the past two decades, the Japanese developmentalist regime has become unstable because of the neoliberal and competitive reform of the national–local governmental relationship. Most local governments in Japan have shifted to selection and concentration in public investment; for example, they have focused on urban core redevelopment and left peripheral areas underdeveloped. Thus, in the post-disaster regional reconstruction process, we may see uneven inter- and intra-regional development, which may widen the economic gap between the urban core and peripheral areas.

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Next, we address our second question, regarding whether the reconstruction projects following the disaster will change the local political and economic structures in the devastated regions and, if so, which structures will emerge. To answer this question, we may need to engage in long-term research. However, we can propose hypotheses based on the case of Ofunato. The first is the revival of developmentalism. Massive investment in reconstruction funded by the national government may awaken local actors' memories of the golden age of developmentalism. However, a revival of the developmentalist age is unlikely because, currently, reconstruction projects

funded by the national government are selective and competitive. Thus, we propose a second hypothesis, that the reconstruction process may strengthen the neoliberalization of the local regime. Alternatively, after the completion of regional reconstruction projects, a local regime may emerge that is an amalgam of developmentalism and neoliberalism (see Table 1).

CONCLUSION

The ongoing regional post-disaster reconstruction projects in Japan (see Table 2) will be important in

Table 1: Local regime shift after the 3/11 disaster

	Developmentalist regime	Neoliberal regime	Post 3/11 regime?
	Era of economic high growth: 1950s-1980s	After economic growth: 1990s- 2000s	After the 3/11 disaster: 2010s-?
Regional policy of national state	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “Inter-regional even development of national land” ● National “equal” fiscal support and subsidy policy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “Inter-regional competition and independence of region” ● “Selection and concentration” of national fiscal resource and competition driven fiscal support 	
Constellation of local actors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Local bureaucrat-led coalition building ● Public-private partnership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Local entrepreneur-led coalition building ● Public-private partnership 	
Goal of local regime	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Regional economic growth ● Industrialization and modernization ● Intra-regional even development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Regional economic growth ● Industrial restructuring ● Selective investment for enhancing regional competitiveness 	

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Table 2: Road map for regional reconstruction (case of Iwate Prefecture)

		2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	(FY)
Coast and Port	Building bank and floodgate	Onset			Completed					
	Strengthening floodgate	Onset						Completed		
	Building levee and disaster-prevention forest	Onset						Completed		
	Repairing floodgate		Onset		Completed					
	Building and repairing levee and floodgate in fishing port	Onset			Completed					
Town and community	Land redemarcation and settlement transfer	Onset						Completed		
Road	Building and repairing road and highway		Onset					Completed		
Public housing	Building public housing estate		Onset		Completed					
Fishing Port	Repairing port	Onset			Completed					

Source: *Iwate Nippo*, published on June 12th, 2012.

revitalizing the areas affected by the Great East Japan Earthquake. Therefore, understanding the factors that shape these projects and seeking awareness of their influence on local political situations are important areas of research. To comprehensively answer the questions posed in this paper, further research is needed to elucidate the national and local politics as well as the political economy surrounding the post-disaster reconstruction projects. This paper has described the case of Ofunato. More case studies and continued analysis of the reconstruction process, in Ofunato and elsewhere, are required.

Notes

1 By *The Construction Plan of New Ofunato city (Ofunato shi—Sanriku cho gappei kensetsu keikakusho)*.

2 According to a paper presented by Ofunato city authority on March 27, 2012.

3 Selected cities and regions are Kamaishi (Iwate Pref.), Iwanuma, Higashi Matsushima (Miyagi Pref.), Minami Soma, Shinchi (Fukushima Pref.) (above: devastated areas), Shimokawa (Hokkaido Pref.), Kashiwa (Chiba Pref.), Yokohama, Toyama (Toyama Pref.), and Kitakyushu (Fukuoka Pref.).

4 From Cabinet Office's "New Growth Strategy", published in June 2010.

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